The Algebra of Life

These are the best answers I have found to perennial questions that haunt many people. Why is there suffering? What am I? What is my purpose? How do I attain freedom? What happens after death? What is a good life?

The reasoning you are about to hear is not my own, although the synthesis of ideas probably is. I draw heavily on Schopenhauer and Spinoza. On the face of it they don't have much in common. Spinoza is quite heavily criticized by Schopenhauer in parts, and especially when Spinoza comes out with tautologies such as 'every effect has a cause'. Well of course it does, a cause is implied in the notion of an effect. Even so, Spinoza offers the best description of the emotional nature of man I have come across.

So let's begin.

What am I?

The answer to this question is simpler than you might imagine. For any experience to take place there must be a subject (the experiencer) and an object (the thing experienced). The object of experience can be anything that impinges itself upon our consciousness. This includes physical objects, the sensations from our body (which is just another object really), and thoughts. Any object of perception is obviously not us. We in turn are the subject - the thing that experiences. The thing that is experienced is not us, the experiencer is what we are.

Every night most of us experience nothingness, in deep dreamless sleep. We can fall to sleep at eleven pm and awake at seven am, and during that eight-hour period we simply did not exist as a conscious entity, if our sleep was dreamless. As the nervous system shuts down, so we lose consciousness of external objects, and even our own bodies. And if we shut down even more, we become unaware of the mental processes taking place within us. In effect, all the objects have disappeared - external objects, our bodies and even our thoughts and mental images. The same happens when we are put under by an anesthetic during an operation. One minute we see the anesthetist inject the anesthetic, and in the next instance we awaken to the sound of voices, with seemingly no elapsed time between the two events.

There can be no subject (or experiencer) if there are no things to experience. That we come back to the same sense of ‘me’ when we wake up is now fairly well understood. Our memory records events that give us a sense of the past - our own personal history. But it isn’t just memory that gives us this feeling of continuity. When conscious I definitely have the feeling ‘this is me’. Antonio Damasio is a Portuguese-American neuroscientist and university professor, who takes Spinoza’s notions of mind and body very seriously. He claims that the brain effectively creates a map of the body, and it is this map that tells me every morning when I wake that this is me and not someone else that has awoken. The parts of the brain that perform this mapping can be damaged. In such situations, a person has no sense of being someone. So our sense of continuity and identity comes from memory and a map in the brain respectively. Again, the mental constructs created by our brains are objects, and the experiencer is you, the subject.

So, to answer the question ‘What am I?’ We simply have to ask what the experiencer is. And the answer to this seemingly simple question is that we can never know. In the words of Schopenhauer “That which knows all things and is known by none is the subject”. Since the subject is not an object, we cannot know it. The eye cannot look at itself, and so you can never know what you are. In fact the term ‘what’ is misleading, it leads us to think we are another object, but we are not - we are the unknowable subject.

What happens after death?

The answer to this should be fairly obvious now. Since our brain and bodies die, along with all our sense organs, we no longer have objects to experience, and so, as in deep dreamless sleep, to all intents and purposes we cease to exist. But Schopenhauer does give a hint on our state after death - we are nothing and everything. Having relinquished a limited captive state within the body we go back to become part of the universal subject, which is not limited. For Schopenhauer, this infinite subject is the will-to-life - the universal subject that manifests in finite creatures to experience finite objects. And so for the individual death-is-death, but as Socrates said - nothing is sweeter than deep dreamless sleep.

Why is there suffering?

I’ll divide suffering into two parts. Firstly, we live in a universe composed of an infinite number of things. These things interact with each other according

to various laws. So the law of gravity says that if a tile slips from the roof of a building and hits you on the head, then it may well kill you, or at least give you a bad headache. As bodies we are just objects in a universe of objects, and if something happens that harms us we suffer. That is the simple part.

The second part of this is the way sentient creatures cause suffering for each other - and this is more involved. Within every living creature is a will-to-life. Some might call it the survival instinct, or the conatus, as the ancients called it. Every creature is primarily driven by the drive for self-preservation, and various emotions motivate our behaviors in this respect - fear and pain being the most obvious.

In the world of animals this survival instinct requires that other creatures (both plant and animal) are killed and eaten. As such the suffering of animals is built into the scenario they find themselves in. Schopenhauer says that the survival instinct is just part of the will-to-life, and is a blind evolutionary force it has as much awareness of itself as the law of gravity. Reproduction is also a part of this will-to-life, and nature works so that only the fittest get to reproduce - generally anyway. And so we see violent clashes between males within a species for mating rights, and sometimes females also. That the will-to-life is unconscious is well demonstrated by the way animals treat each other as if they were inanimate objects, and simply do not acknowledge each other’s sentience.

With human beings it all gets a little more complicated. While we all have the will-to-life driving us on, it can become perverted because of our imaginative capability and intelligence. The emotions such as anger, hatred, envy, jealousy and love are experienced by all animals, including man. When the will-to-life is threatened in some way the negative emotions will arise. When the will-to-life is reinforced, then so called positive emotions of joy, love and excitement will come about.

In many situations human beings will become envious of a person who has something that is viewed as life enhancing. This envy may know no bounds and develop into violence. Pride is another emotion where one person will imagine they have superior capabilities and possessions to other people, and if in a position of power will treat them badly. The real problem for human beings however is that they can create abstract concepts such as nation, religion, corporation - and so on. The will-to-life can become identified with such abstractions, and if a nation is threatened for example, then the members of that nation see it as a threat on themselves. Religious wars are another example, and so is the ruthless behavior of businesses. And so man not only causes other men to suffer by directly threatening their will-to-life, but it can also happen because of identification with abstractions.

So suffering is built in. Men have the possibility to moderate the amount of suffering through the use of reason. Medicine and effective shelter are two way to alleviate physical suffering, and the construction of a State with laws is a way to protect men from each other. However, reason is a weak thing compared with the will-to-life, and so there will always be a battle between the forces of greed, exploitation, violence and bigotry, and their moderation through the power of the State.

Why not commit suicide?

The suicide equation is very simple. A person commits suicide when the pain associated with living is greater then the force of the will-to-life. Schopenhauer for example concluded that life is a cruel and vicious affair, although he did actually enjoy his own life. Had it become unbearable then no doubt he would have at least considered suicide. In Ancient Rome and Greece suicide was a matter of course if things became too much. Life was definitely tougher then, and so it was viewed as a fairly legitimate thing to do.

What is my purpose?

The notion of ‘purpose’ is a wholly man-made thing. The universe has no notion of purpose, and it has no final cause - a goal toward which it is headed. If the universe had purpose it would mean it was inadequate in some way, and would be striving to address that inadequacy. But how can the ‘all’ have a notion of something that is outside itself - it just doesn’t make sense. And because the universe has no purpose neither do its constituent parts - you, me, the planet, our galaxy, and so on. However because we are finite we do need other parts of the universe to support our existence - food, money, shelter. And so at a purely human level then we can have purposes which serve the aim of helping us persist in our existence. But our life does not have any intrinsic purpose - how can the parts have purpose when the whole does not?

Some people find this distressing because we seem to be programmed to search for meaning. Obviously our ego needs to affirm itself in some way. But the fact that there is no purpose is actually a very liberating thing. It means we are a part of something that is wholly free. So if we can rise above our own petty ego and identify with the ‘all’ then we can get a sense of that freedom.

How do I attain freedom?

You attain freedom by realizing that you have no freedom at all, as a finite being. Every aspect of your life is driven by a chain of causality. You are programmed by your genetics, your parents, society, peers and the will-to-live. Most of the great thinkers have reached the same conclusion, and modern science is showing that we are wholly conditioned beings. Gurdjieff said that man is a machine. Spinoza and Schopenhauer said that the notion of free will is nothing more than a fantasy.

Again, people can find this distressing, but when you realize that you are a wholly conditioned part of an unconditioned whole, then you can relax, and as the child's rhyme goes - Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.

What is a Good Life?

The extent you can live a good life is wholly dependent on Lady Fortuna - in other words luck. Someone with a crippling, painful illness probably cannot live a good life. However, for most of us the motto should be - never pay for pain with pleasure. In other words, it is fairly apparent that smoking, alcohol, excessive food consumption, and so on, are likely to lead to some form of disease and pain. So the pleasures associated with indulgence never exceed the pain that they might create.

Epicurus was probably the master of the good life. His lifestyle was simple, away from society, and he lived with like-minded people. He would grow his own food and considered a piece of cheese to be a banquet. Unfortunately, the rise of Christianity put an end to his garden idyls. Looking on with a jealous eye the Christians destroyed the Epicurean movement, building places of misery (Churches and monasteries), where there had once been a simple and pleasurable Epicurean way of life. The Epicurean way of life would be hard to follow today, but even so, simplicity is the key.

At an emotional level, we need to be honest about our emotional nature, with all its hatred, envies, sadness, obsessions, pride and so on. Once we can see the emotions in an honest way, then we just need to accept them, and not judge or try and change them. In this way, they lose force and are less troubling. As someone once said to me - what we resist tends to persist.